NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Jerusalem church leader says pope will visit in May

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Vatican City

Latin-rite Patriarch Faoud Twal of Jerusalem told reporters he expected to host Pope Francis on a visit to the Holy Land in May.

Listing "upcoming events for next year," Twal began with "the pope's visit to the Holy Land planned for next May, first in Jordan, then in Israel-Palestine."

At his Dec. 19 meeting with the press, the patriarch did not give specific dates for the trip. At the Vatican, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the spokesman, told reporters it would be up to Pope Francis to decide when to announce the trip's dates, although the spokesman confirmed a Vatican advance team had already visited.

Israeli newspapers were reporting a May 24 papal flight to Amman, Jordan, and a May 25-26 visit to Jerusalem and to Bethlehem in the Palestinian territories.

Pope Francis had told reporters in July that he hoped to travel to Jerusalem to fulfill a plan proposed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. The Orthodox patriarch suggested they meet in Jerusalem in 2014 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras, a meeting that set the stage for Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation and dialogue.

Speaking to reporters about the Holy Land in general, the Latin-rite patriarch said he met Pope Francis on the day of the pontiff's March 19 installation and several times since then.

"He cares about the Holy Land and the Middle East. His statements clearly express that the Holy See maintains a consistent interest for our region," the patriarch said.

As Christmas drew near, he said that the eyes of the world look toward Bethlehem, West Bank.

"It is from here, in the midst of conflict and violence tearing our Middle East apart, that the mystery of Christmas gently rises and spreads throughout the world."

While the patriarch insisted that the entire Middle East would not be at peace until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is settled, he also urged special prayers and assistance for the people of Syria and for the many foreign workers from the Philippines who are suffering far from home because their families were impacted by the deadly typhoon in November.

"The situation in the Middle East is becoming more complex and more dramatic," he said. "The instability affects everyone, but especially our faithful who are tempted to emigrate."

Source URL (retrieved on *02/14/2016 - 02:22*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/jerusalem-church-leader-says-pope-will-visit-may